

## **Lyman Trumbull and the Pullman Strike**

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Through he did not win the Debs case following the Pullman Strike of 1894, Lyman Trumbull played a part in making progress towards labor's legal rights. His involvement helped bring the question of fair wages to national attention for organized labor.

Lyman Trumbull was born on October 12, 1813, into a family of six children. His father Benjamin Trumbull was a Yale graduate who served in the Connecticut legislature and was also a judge. He was also born into a family of strong political figures, such as Jonathan Trumbull, who was a close friend of George Washington, a judge, chief justice and governor of Massachusetts for fifteen years. His mother Elizabeth Mather Trumbull was born into a very religious family of ministers. One was Cotton Mather, a renowned Puritan writer. Both Benjamin and Elizabeth were religious people with strong morals, who hated the idea of slavery, and believed strongly in the idea of equality. Lyman's childhood aspirations were to attend Yale, like his father and grandfather, but he could not due to insufficient money. When he was eighteen he became a teacher, but moved to Georgia and became an attorney. Eventually, he moved to Belleville, Illinois, where he practiced law with John Reynolds, a former governor of Illinois. In time, he opened his own law office with his brother. Trumbull was elected to the lower house of the Illinois legislature, along with Abraham Lincoln. Soon he replaced Stephen Douglas as Secre-

tary of State. In 1843, after a dispute, Governor Ford asked Trumbull to resign his position. It was the same year Trumbull was married to Julia Jayne. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Trumbull served on the Illinois Supreme Court for a total of four years. In the 1860s, after the Civil War and President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, Trumbull wrote the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery in the country, and the Civil War Act, also giving more freedom and opportunity to African Americans. Also, from 1861 to 1872, Trumbull was the chairman of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee. After his political career waned, Trumbull returned to Chicago to practice law.

In September 1893, the Pullman Works, a train car company near Chicago, reduced its wages an average of twenty-five percent. However, it did not lower the rent in the company houses. Workers of Pullman's Palace Car Company joined the American Railroad Union, established by Eugene Debs to unite railway laborers. A committee of Pullman workers waited for a compromise, but received nothing, neither increased wages nor lowered rents. Three members of the committee were fired, and that evening, May 10, 1894, the Pullman workers voted to strike. The Pullman works closed and the American Railway Union, with a claimed membership of 15,000, agreed to boycott the Pullman Company. The Pullman Company, refusing to receive any communication from the union, also refused to allow five judges to decide whether or not there was anything to judge. Unless the Pullman Company would agree to the arbitration, the American

Railway Union decided to stop handling Pullman cars. To avoid the boycott, the Pullman Company met with General Managers' Association and came to an agreement to ignore workers' demands.

The boycott and more strikes spread quickly, and General Managers' Association members dismissed men who refused to run or service passenger trains with Pullman cars on them. Violence ensued around Chicago and in many western states where the American Railway Union had members. A federal injunction was passed on July 2, 1894. This injunction prohibited American Railway leaders from "compelling or inducing by threats, intimidation, persuasion, force, or violence, railway employees to refuse or fail to perform their duties".

Eventually, federal troops entered the dispute, which Illinois Governor Altgeld protested strongly because he had not requested them. President Cleveland responded negatively to Altgeld, and on July 10, Debs and the other main officers of the Railway Union were arrested, charged with conspiracy to obstruct United States mail, and held under \$10,000 bail. The American Railway Union tried unsuccessfully to abandon the strike, under the condition that the workers be rehired without prejudice. A week later, on July 17, Debs and the others were arrested again on a different charge of contempt of the court's July 2 injunction. On July 18, the Pullman Company gave notice that it was reopening, and the strike ended.

On July 23, the hearing began with Deb's lawyers, Clarence Darrow and Lyman Trumbull, arguing that both charges against Debs had been for the same thing, which was illegal. They tried to have the second charge dropped but the judge ruled in disagreement. Darrow and Trumbull then asked for a jury trial in a criminal court and the judge also denied this request. In the contempt trial, the Pullman layers argued that the government had the right to remove a "public nuisance" and that the railroad was a sort of public highway. Since courts could remove obstacles of "public nuisances" from roads, they could and should do the same on railroads. They felt that by bringing workers together to withdraw their service from an interstate railroad, Debs and the other union leaders had blocked the flow of travel. According to this reasoning, Debs and the workers were found guilty of being a "public nuisance" and being in contempt of the injunction. Debs was sentenced to six months in prison, his sentence beginning on January 8, 1895.

Darrow and Trumbull then took the case to the Supreme Court, arguing that the contempt trial had been conducted in the wrong court; therefore, it was unconstitutional. Attorney General Richard Olney argued against Debs before the Supreme Court, saying that the government must protect the property that is committed to its care. On May 27, 1895, the Supreme Court agreed with Olney, establishing an important principle for strong federal power.

Even after so many losses and defeats, Lyman Trumbull and his case still brought the strike, and the question of organized labor's legal rights to national attention. [Jenna Bishop, *Trumbull, Lyman*, [www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihy990224.html](http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihy990224.html).3 (Nov. 17, 2004); *Events of the Pullman Strike*, [www.1912.histor.ohio-state.edu.eventsofpullmanStrike.htm](http://www.1912.histor.ohio-state.edu.eventsofpullmanStrike.htm). (Nov. 2, 2004); Rosemary Laughlin, *The Pullman Strike of 1894; American Labor Comes of Age*; Lesley Piersall *Trumbull, Lyman*, Illinois History, [www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihy930237.html](http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihy930237.html). (Nov. 2, 2004)]